Oral history with 80 year old white male, Marked Tree, Arkansas (Transcription)

W272 28 May 1981 Marked Tree, Arkansas

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A: My name is <gap> and I was born and raised at Ashton, Mississippi, in the hills.

Q: What year?

A: Born in 1901. And (?) was named after an old Indian chief (?). They had seven springs there, all different minerals, and people from here and yon went there, and they had a big hotel. They'd come there, people that had money, you know, vacations, and they'd drink that spring water. Doctors would prescribe the different kinds of water and you had it there. They had a big spring and lots and lots of big trees there.

Q: What did your father do down in that area?

A: My father, he farmed mostly, and he worked there in the (?) grist mill a whole lot, and gin.

Q: And what did you do then when you grew up? Did you farm there in the area or...?

A: You mean after I got grown?

Q: Well, growing up.

A: Well, I'll tell you right now, it was pretty hard back there back then. We farmed with an old blind mare and sometimes a mule, just one now. One mule, one plow, and one man, you know. Drove one plow and come back down the other row.

Q: And that's pretty washed out, eroded soil up there.

A: Yeah, it was pretty bad. But we made about a third of a bale of cotton (?), and corn growed a little better, especially with fertilizer.

Q: Did your father own the farm?

A: Yeah.

Q: About how many acres?

A: Well, right there where we lived was 30 acres, and then about a mile from there he owned 20 acres. We'd have to go back and forth to farm that 20 acres.

Q: Did you get an opportunity to go to school?

A: Oh yeah. That was in the country, and our schoolhouse, we had to walk about three, four miles to school, and it just taught to the eighth grade. When I got to the eighth grade well that was as far as it went, you know, and I couldn't go to town school. They had a school in town, you go nine months a year, up to twelfth grade, but we didn't have money enough for that. You had to pay that. So I didn't go any further than eighth grade, except when we was in that eighth grade, there was an old hardshell Baptist preacher that was teaching us. He went to all the academies and taught us and stuff like that. He was a tired old fellow. Well, he said, "now all I can teach you from now on, I can teach you mental arithmetic." And he commenced us on that, and you know, before school was out, were we could just mighty near figure anything, in the air you know -- no pencil, no nothing., figure it out. Great long ones, problems we figured out. But he taught us.

Q: What did you do as a young man? Did you marry while you were still there, or go into farming yourself?

A: Well, I married there all right. But a, there were a lot of saw mills there. Them hills was covered in pine timber, and a saw mill in every hollow. We'd help with the farm, of course it was a small farm and we didn't work there all the time, and us boys, there was three of us, I was the youngest of the three, and we'd work at the saw mills the rest of the time. That was practically all of the time. (?). And that was hard work. And I reckon that's how come me so durn cussed.

Q: There were a few Negroes around there, weren't there?

A: Yeah, there was a few.

Q: Did any of them work in the saw mills?

A: Yeah, they worked just anywhere they could get the work. And they got along well. Whites and Blacks got along well, but there wasn't all that many Blacks there. One family lived down below us and one old . . . there was a boy, he was a great big boy, but he was young, I guess he was about 17, 18 years old -- called him Lightfoot. Nearly everybody had to pick on Lightfoot, you know. They had a Colored church not far from there. Sometimes us boys would all get together and go down there and listen to them. And it was pretty enjoyable. The singing was good. The preaching was alright.

Q: What brought you to Arkansas?

A: Starvation.

Q: Tell us how you starved. That's a pretty good story, I'm sure.

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A: Well, it was 1932 and y'all know something about that. I had been working in a furniture store there in Corinth and the jobs were all playing out and that didn't pay much so I just decided I would do something else. I went on a road construction job. (?) bridge carpenter, and that panned out pretty good for a while, but the jobs all run out. Then '32, you know, and I first took a job in Canadatown in Tennessee (?) Mountains, but that finally played out. That's where I learned to be a bridge carpenter. When that job played out well our boss there heard of a job in Texas, near College Station, Texas. (?). So I pulled out down there. I had about a dollar and sixty cents in money. So I pulled out a-hitchhiking down there. And it was pretty hard getting down there. There was too many hitchhikers at that time. I got down to Shreveport, Louisiana, well, there was a crowd trying

to catch a freight train, and I was always a little slower than the rest of them. I was kind of at the back of the crowd and I seen this (?) in front of them. I didn't know what it was all about. I just stood there, and the first thing there was this switch engine coming right at me. And I didn't have time, I didn't think to get off the tracks so I just jumped up and caught the coupling with both hands, and hurt my knees. But, I got on down to College Station, Texas, and uh, I got the job down there, because I was a carpenter and they had some bridges. I worked there nearly a year, and then I couldn't find no more jobs, and they didn't know of any more jobs of that kind. So I come back to Iuka. And uh, I don't know, somebody told me to start picking cotton out in Arkansas. You could get a job picking cotton out in Arkansas, so I didn't have any money, but I had an old Ford, well it was a roadster, but it was made a flat behind for a little truck. I had a wife and two children. So me and my wife, we got out there and picked blackberries, and took into town and sold them, about 15, 20 cents a gallon. We got up a little money and we loaded up, pulled out for Arkansas. So we got over here and I stopped at West Memphis, but there was a lot of woods between West Memphis and Memphis then, and there was some parks or something in there and some buildings, little buildings. We stayed all night there in one of them and had to break in a window or get it open someway and jot in there. Mosquitoes liked to eat us up, but we stayed there that night. The next morning we come on and we had a little stuff to cook with us. We stopped and built up a fire at Jericho. And there was a cooking us some breakfast (?) out come a great big Mexican out of one of them stores, said "You can't build up a fire (?). This is a public place. You're liable to get something a fire." "Well, we done got it built. We about got our coffee ready, and we're going to stay 'til we eat." And we did. Then we come up to Frenchman's Bayou. And (?) store, he had a gin and store there and he told me that Mr. Norton, up above there about a couple of miles was hiring for cotton-pickers. Guess the cotton was opening up. So I pulled out up there and seen him and made a deal to pick cotton for him.

Q: Do you remember what the deal was?

A: Yeah. Fifty cents a hundred. He was going to furnish the house, had some farm houses there, wasn't no count but you could live in them, especially that time of year, it was warm. But we didn't have no furniture, except we put one mattress on the back end of that little car, and some quilts, and some cooking utensils. I'd been a bridge carpenter and I had a box of tools, and I put that on there. Well, the old man (?) he told me, just get any of those houses I wanted. And says you can go down to Frenchman's Bayou and get you some grain goers and stuff and build you some furniture. I told him I was a carpenter. He said okay. So I went down there and got me some grain goer and what ever I could scrap up in the way of lumber, and come back and built me some beds, a table, stools. We went right to work and got that fifty cents a hundred and pay off every night. That was more money that we'd seen in a long time. You could save money at that fifty cents a hundred. Then he had a , his daughter had a farm, a small farm, over on the Mississippi levee, and he wanted me to go over there and see after that farm. He had rented it from this fellow. I did, I went over there and the old man was working all day labor, 75 cents a day. It was all colored. So I set in there, and I didn't know nothing about farming in this country. I'd farmed some in Mississippi, but it was altogether different. I said, "Well, I'm going to have to learn it from the colored people." I didn't know whether they were going to cooperate with me or not, me being the boss. But they did. They learned me how to farm.

Q: What were some of the differences in farming?

A: Well, up there, well we didn't have no gumbo there. It was clay and sand. And here it was gumbo, and you had to plow it different, and you had to do different things to even get a crop on it. Had to plant it different and different times and stuff. But them colored people,

they learned me how to farm. And I stayed there two or three years on that place, and worked them colored people, and some of them got up to a dollar a day before I left there.

Q: Were you kind of hired as a farm manager? Did you have a renting or sharing agreement?

A: No, no. I just uh, I was working by the week.

Q: What did you make a week, do you remember?

A: No, I don't remember how much I made a week, but it wasn't enough to live on, and weeks I didn't work, in the wintertime, I didn't get paid. But the old man that I was working for, he went to Joiner and got me a dozen field traps. He said "There's a lot of meat in this country," said "You can probably make it on these dozen field traps." I said "Well, I ain't got no money." And he went and got them for three dollars and something. I was averaging catching from one to two meats a week, and sometimes a coon or a muskrat or two. I was going to Joiner

and sell that fur and get our groceries, and I made it fine.

Q: Had you done trapping before?

A: Well, not much, no. Maybe a few rats or something. But I done pretty good. I want to tell you about what, how they done there then. It was pitiful. Those darkies, uh, colored

people that lived up and down the river done all the work and didn't hardly get anything. Just barely enough to exist on. All them farmers had commissaries, and the only place they could get something was at the commissaries. They didn't have no money, you see. Didn't none of them have no money. They'd go to the commissaries and buy stuff. Then I've had alot of them come to me and sell me matches, tobacco, and stuff like that at a reduced price in order to get the money to buy stamps and stuff with. It was pitiful. And if they didn't plow their cotton and stuff every week they didn't get no furnishings. When uh, they'd let them make a share crop, and they made them plow it every week and everything (?) good, and when laying by time comes about July, well they'd send them a bill from this commissary. If they owed something like two, three hundred dollars they'd put it nine hundred. They'd make it way up there high where they couldn't pay it. Then they'd say "Well, now, if you can't pay it, you don't think you can pay it this fall, well, you can just turn the crop back over to us and we'll pay you to pick cotton." So that sounded better to them. And (?). So all of them turned their crops back (?) May and July, and take that by the hundred.

Q: Were the farmers, by the time you got here they were trying to get away from sharecropping and renting, and doing the day labor as much as they could. Is that right?

A: No. Sharecropping was better because they could get a furnish on that. Whether they was working or not they could eat. But if they was working by the day they just got a day's pay for a day's work, and they couldn't eat sometimes.

Q: Yeah. But, I mean the owners preferred day labor.

A: Oh yeah. The owners preferred day labor, yeah. Because they could get them for 75 cents a day at that time and they could do pretty good on it.

Q: Did you find some of the white landlords tried to take better care of their black sharecroppers than others?

A: Well, yes, some of them. But they wasn't none of them very good, I tell you. They didn't . . . It was just kind of a tradition. It had been that way so long that they didn't expect nothing else.

Q: Did you encounter any problems with your white landlord, your white boss?

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A: Yeah, he wanted to go up with my wife.

Q: Oh, is that right?

A: Yeah, we had a little trouble, there, but we got that over with, and I worked on with him, and then he married. He was a widower, but then he married a <unintelligible text>, down at (Turrell?) and she had a farm down on the Mississippi River, uh levee, some on the inside, some on the outside. He wanted me to go down there and see after that farm after he'd (?). So I did and stayed there, I believe two years down there. Then I went from there to <unintelligible text>. The government had bought some land down there and was sharecropping it out. They'd buy you a mule and plow, you see, and let people move in there and work the land. I made a crop or two down there. Then they bought this up here at Marked Tree, what you call the Northern Ohio. It was a big farm (?). I got a chance to move up here. But I moved up here, it was just a few days before come in raining so much and the flood come. I hadn't got to work a day before the flood come.

Q: That was 1937?

A: 1937. Yeah, it was pretty rough. <gap> by the boat, you might say But I got out, and I came up to Marked Tree and stayed at the (family legion hut, they had a bunch up there?). Then they was taking them to Memphis to the fairgrounds, and me and my bunch went over there. Well, they went first, over there, and then I come the next day. I still had this old pickup truck, car made into a truck. I drove it over there parked it and went on into the fairground. By that time everybody was missing (?), and I'd been reported missing.

Q: What kind of accomodations did they put you up in at the fairgrounds?

A: Well, uh, just like the army. There was too many of us, and alot of them was sick, some of them with pneumonia and everything else. But they took them out of the fairgrounds as soon as they could. We had to, they tried to let families stay together as much as they could, but uh, they didn't have no rooms for them, just maybe put up some sheets or something (?). And way in the night one night when I was there, well uh, a man came through, foreign man, and said "well, everyone that wants to leave, well uh, go up yonder and sign up." And some of them wanted to know where they was going. He said, "Does it make any difference?" He said "If you want to leave, go up there and sign up." I didn't say a word. I went up there and signed up, and we left that night, on a train and went to Chatanooga, Tennessee. Had camped on the side of a mountain up there. It was, uh, it was a Boy Scout camp I believe. Something in that order. We made it just fine up there. They had soldiers took care of everything, you know. They even had soldier cooks and everything. We made it find. I made a little money up there. I still had my tools. I wouldn't leave

without them. I took my tools with me. There was barbers, lawyers, everything else up there in our bunch. Then there was a barber up there said "Can you make me a barber chair?" I said "Yeah, I'll make you a barber's chair." I went and got one of the soldiers. He rustled up the lumber and I made that fellow a barber chair. He paid me something for it. They wanted one and another thing done, and I made some money around there carpentrying. Because I had the tools. Nobody else didn't have none. I had the knowhow, too, to do the carpentrying. And anyhow, the Red Cross was supposed to have been our sponsors. After we was there three weeks, or were we there five weeks? I believe we were there five weeks. Then they said that the waters went down enough in Arkansas to come back home. They sent us back on a train. When we got here they gave us an order for groceries. Helped us out a whole lot. And went right back to farming.

Q: This was on the federal land?

A: Yes, it was on the Northern Ohio. The government had bought that, yeah federal.

Q: I've heard that in the flood relief there was a lot of segregation, that the black didn't get as good a deal as the whites. Did that happen?

A: No. No, that didn't happen. Of course back in '37 the whites kind of dominated the colored, but at that time seemed like it was better, they got along better then than there had been, because everybody was desperate, you know. That's what brings us together, is the necessity.

Q: In the course of moving to the fairgrounds and to Chatanooga, do you remember any incidents in which you helped blacks or they helped you?

A: Well, yes. Everybody was pretty well equal at that time. Where it, well, it was government sponsored, you see, and they had to be in one way or another. But anyhow, I always got along with blacks. And we didn't have any of that kind of trouble. However, there wasn't very many colored people that went to Chatanooga with us. Maybe, just a very few.

Q: But what happened when you came back then?

A: Well, I went to farming.

Q: Were you able to make a crop?

A: Oh yeah, yeah.

Q: Did you have trouble with the cutworms?

A: Well, I never did pay no attention to them. At that time we was having to live in old houses that was already there, you see.

But then in '39, well the government built new houses, and sold us the land and the houses.

Q: Those had indoor plumbing, didn't they? And other modern features?

A: Well, uh, no. They didn't have indoor plumbin. They had a (?) pump in the kitchen, pumped out of a well, and they had a pump out at the lot for the mules and stuff. But they didn't have no running water.

Q: How many acres were you able to buy from the government?

A: 40, more or less.

Q: And what kind of terms did they give you to pay for it?

A: Well, loan terms. I think they figured it on 30 years. Anyhow, I made two or three crops there. After I bought the house and land, and what rent, that uh, they rent, in other words, of course I was getting the dole (null, dull, old?) then, but if I had rented the land out it would have made two or three or four payments on the place. That was pretty easy to pay for. But at that time, my wife had left me, run off with another man, and my children's getting grown, two of them. The army--the draft coming on, that was in '42. They drafted me because I didn't have a wife. Besides, I didn't care. I wanted to go anyhow. I went to the army.

Q: You would have been 41 years old then, wouldn't you?

A: Yeah, I was 41 when I first went in. I was 42 when I came out.

Q: Before we get into the army experiences, about how many other farms did the government make out of that Ohio?

A: Well, uh, to start with, they bought a little land after that, to start with there was around 50 houses.

Q: And each one was 40 acres, more or less.

A: Yeah, 40 acres, more or less.

Q: Do you have any idea how many of those people were able to keep that land and make their payments?

A: Well, they all would have been able, but a lot of them left, for different things. I left, but now, I regretted it. I wanted to get in the store business. I'd worked in furniture stores before, and I wanted to get in the furniture business. Another fellow lived on the place, there Hawkins, he had bought a fellow out up here in town, used furniture business he had. He came by and asked me if I wanted to go in with him. I told him yes I wanted to go in with him. So he came by the next morning and I came to town with him and we went into

the store business. And then (?), the supervisor, he said I couldn't keep the place if I didn't live on it and farm it. I didn't have no better sense at that time than to believe it, so I moved off and sold it. But it wasn't but justa -- well, it wasn't a year after that that they began to move off and keep their places. I had two mules, lot of cattle, hogs, and I had plenty of seed, feed, everything to make a crop with, and I could have moved into town myself, let somebody moved into my house and sharecropped it. I would have paid for that place in just a few years.

Q: What did the government charge you for that farm?

A: Well, it was about 6,000 and something. It was big enough.

Q: Was that the Resettlement Administration?

Q: That was the Farm Security Administration.

Q: Farm Security Administration?

A: Yeah, uh huh. That's what it was.

Q: FSA?

A: Uh huh. Well, I had a lot of experiences after I come into town and got into the furniture business, I'll tell you. Y'all want to know more about the farm?

Q: We want to ask some questions about diet. What kind of food did people eat when you came to Arkansas? What were the day laborers getting to eat, for instance?

A: Well, that's a big question. What they could get a hold of. But, we made it pretty good, and we eat pretty well while we was out there on the government farm. They even had a, sold us a pressure cooker to can in and learned us how to can, and we raised vegetables and fruit and can it.

Q: You hadn't done much of that before that though?

A: No.

Q: Just bought it from the commissary or . . .?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did the county extension agents come out to your farm and give you advice about how to farm?

A: Well, they didn't do much of that, no. Sometimes they'd have a little meeting or something and call us over at the headquarters up there, give us a little talk and all that stuff. They didn't uh -- they had a supervisor out there that stayed on the job, and he was supposed to have took care of us like that.